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Talking Points on Syria for the DCI
(8 December 1983)

Despite persistent rumors that President Assad has been incapacitated, we believe he is recovering following his hospitalization [redacted] and that he is providing overall policy direction for Syria.

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- In our judgment, the film broadcasts by Syrian television on 27 and 30 November showing Assad meeting with Baath Party leaders and touring a construction site in Damascus are genuine.

[redacted]

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Even if Assad recovers rapidly, however, we believe the political unease prompted by his hospitalization will impel the President to take steps to clarify the succession process.

- The appointment of one or more vice presidents to meet the constitutional provisions concerning interim rule would be one likely step.
- If and when Assad does clarify succession, tensions within his inner circle that have been simmering since he was hospitalized will probably increase.
- We do not now expect this political maneuvering to threaten Assad's rule as long as he remains healthy, but the power struggle between Rifaat Assad, the President's brother and commander of the regime's 50,000-man praetorian guard, and his opponents in the Party and the regime is likely to increase. [redacted]

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While Assad remains on a diminished work schedule, we believe day-to-day decisionmaking has been delegated to his key advisers.

- Senior regime and Baath Party leaders including Foreign Minister Khaddam, Chief of Staff Shihabi, Intelligence Chief Ali Duba, and Baath Party Assistant Secretary General al-Ahmar are probably key members of the committee.
- Khaddam's well-publicized meetings with Assad, however, clearly indicate that the President reviews the committee's deliberations. [redacted]

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Assad is almost certainly making the final decisions on Syrian policy in Lebanon.

- Syrian firing on US reconnaissance flights on 3 December indicates Assad will at least selectively challenge US moves he regards as threatening Syria's control over northern and eastern Lebanon.
- Nevertheless, we believe the introduction of US, MNF, and Israeli air and naval power, together with winter weather which complicates Syrian support to its surrogate militias and Syrian confidence that their minimum objectives were achieved at Geneva, have contributed to a more flexible Syrian policy. []

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The Syrians probably hope that having a direct role in the national reconciliation process will allow them to extract political concessions from President Gemayel and engineer constitutional changes giving greater power to Lebanese Muslims.

- During the winter months, Damascus is likely to continue exploring this political track.
- Damascus might accept a tacit agreement with Beirut to shelve the Israel-Lebanon agreement of 17 May, calculating that a new government with greater Muslim representation ultimately would vote to abrogate the accord. []

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Damascus probably will continue to acquiesce in terrorist attacks against the MNF and Israeli positions in south Lebanon, however, and appears unlikely to make a significant effort to curb Iranian-supported activity throughout Lebanon.

- Damascus can continue to deny involvement in radical Shia activity in the south and the Beirut area and probably sees the radicalization of the Shia community as a useful source of pressure on President Gemayel. []

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